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## The Contexts of Critique: Para-Institutions & the Multiple Lives of Institutionality in the Neoliberal University

Leland Tabares

**ABSTRACT** Response to Jodi Melamed, "Proceduralism, Predisposing, Poesis: Forms of Institutionality, In the Making," published in *Lateral* 5.1. Tabares invites us to question the role of what he calls 'para-institutions,' such as corporations, in shaping and influencing the logics and investments within the university. As a counterpoint to these processes, he ponders the possibilities of seizing upon the elements of proceduralism in mobilizing forms of collectivity that can span across institutional contexts outside the academy.

In describing first the neoliberal university's administrative proceduralism and then her conception of a "social being otherwise"—a radical mode of sociality that exists within the contemporary academy while disrupting its proceduralist processes—Jodi Melamed imagines structures of institutionality that resist the academy's institutional power while operating within it.<sup>1</sup> Her turn toward pedagogy emphasizes the importance of cultivating relationships between ourselves (as scholars) and our students.<sup>2</sup> Thus Melamed reminds us that critical investments in the academy always depend on the livelihoods of those producing criticism in addition to those consuming it. By highlighting these collectivizing experiences within the institution that houses them, her essay compels us to ask: What form might critique take within the neoliberal academy such that the context(s) of "social being otherwise" can be made legible and therefore able to exist as a collectivizing force? This question unlocks more questions: Considering that the university is always implicated within a network of institutions, how can critique be sustained by individuals outside of the immediate processes of academic proceduralism? What political potential does critique maintain for academics *and* non-academics in para-institutions, or institutions that are peripheral to the academy yet which directly overlap with certain proceduralist aspects of the academy? These questions are foundational to our ability as scholars to make an impact on the contemporary academy.

There is a certain idealism in taking "social being otherwise" to be uniquely poised to disrupt neoliberal proceduralism since such a form of sociality is constituted by the academic system of power itself. Melamed, following Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, sees "social being otherwise" as "a kind of comportment," a manner of being and acting in the academy, a style of behavior.<sup>3</sup> In this way, she takes otherwise-ness to be a positionality interpellated in a system of power within which acts of otherwise-ness are necessarily legible to others, since otherwise-ness must be able to be conveyed and received in order to be made manifest. What Melamed articulates is a field where "social being otherwise" is perceptible as a recognizable form of cultural capital that designates a certain relationship to power as well as a relationship defined by power. Therefore, in

order for there to be a “social being otherwise,” there must be socially defined features within a field that classify being socially otherwise as a particular form of positionality. Pierre Bourdieu usefully elucidates this dimension in his work on taste in the artistic field: “taste is constituted through confrontation with already realized tastes; it teaches itself what it is by recognizing itself in objects that are themselves already objectified tastes. So, to understand tastes . . . first means understanding, on the one hand, the conditions in which the products on offer are produced, and on the other hand, the conditions in which the consumers ‘produce themselves.’”<sup>4</sup> We notice this dynamic at play in Melamed’s identification with other critics like Harney, Moten, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, all of whom gesture toward a “sociopoetical imagination” that registers otherwise-ness.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the desire for a critically otherwise collective within the academy risks insisting on a rarified radicalism—one that hinges on what Roderick Ferguson calls “a will to institutionality” because it depends upon the academy’s recognition of otherwise-ness through institutional legitimation.<sup>6</sup>

To add, while the academy can be understood as a particular field of power that presents problems to scholars, the contemporary academic institution has also become increasingly a site of overlap for para-institutions—peripheral institutions that are not readily associated with the academy but which are directly implicated in some of its processes—such as late capitalist corporate institutions. These institutional overlaps complicate the form and audience of disruptive collectivities. Part of this point derives from an issue over scale. Depending on how close or how far back we want to scale our perception of the academy as an institution, we can always arrive at institutionality from a different contextual frame (e.g., the old liberal humanist university, the corporate university, the post-national university, the post-welfare state university, the imperial university, etc.).<sup>7</sup> The scale of our contextual frame of the academy as an institution determines the types of investments that get valued, the means by which those investments are legitimated, and the participants within the field. Recently, for example, at a January 2016 shareholders meeting at Apple Inc. in Silicon Valley, Apple’s governing board vetoed shareholder Antonio Avian Maldonado II’s proposal to implement accelerated diversity recruitment initiatives for senior management positions because, as Apple concluded, it was enough that they had already invested financially in HBCUs, minority disciplines within the academy, and women’s leadership conferences.<sup>8</sup> Apple capitalizes on its institutional investments in minoritarian groups to justify discriminatory business practices in the name of diversity. Diversity functions as a form of investment rather than a pathway for personnel participation. Consequently, Apple is able to distance itself from accusations of racism and sexism. The neoliberal corporate institution upholds white male hegemonic institutional structures by profiting off of its specific ties to the academy. If minorities are not present in Silicon Valley, Apple’s logic would seem to suggest, then it must be due to deficiencies in the minority workers themselves, not the company, because the company has already financed so much of their educational opportunities. These points of intersection between the academic institution and its para-institutions cannot be left unexamined because they are the sites where the cultural capital of academic investments overlap with para-institutional investments. By not pressuring these moments, we allow para-institutions to sustain their hegemonic processes in the name of the academy, thus turning the academy into a tool to be used by corporate entities and making the academy appear unfit to combat discriminatory practices outside of its own institutional contexts.

I suggest that we need to take seriously how critique can be made legible for audiences that have influence over the academy yet might not be housed within the academic institution proper. By doing so, we keep our students’ well-being in mind because we are better able to provide them with the ability to influence others who are not necessarily

aware of the specific sociopolitical contexts of academic institutional politics and who therefore might not have the capacity to recognize otherwise-ness as a legible form of disruption. In short, disruptive potentialities need to be more identifiable across institutional contexts. If we ignore how the scales of institutionality affect our perceptions of institutional contexts, we risk precluding discursive possibilities and perpetuating the mainstream assumption that humanities disciplines like, say, those housed in ethnic studies are impractical fields of study for students because academic discourses are only relevant in the context of the academy. Put plainly, we risk further isolating the academy from the public sphere—an especially ironic stance for scholars working in minority disciplines (like myself) with disciplinary histories rooted in community-based activist politics.

So now what?













I argue for a critical position that relies less on establishing an affiliative group formation defined against neoliberal proceduralism and more on decentralizing the very structures that maintain neoliberal proceduralism. I see proceduralism's forms of durability as points of possibility to motivate critiques that institute a durable praxis. James Ferguson, in his work on anti-poverty politics in southern Africa, articulates my concern with critiques of neoliberalism that have a habit of dead-ending at an evaluative level, resulting in "a politics largely defined by negation and disdain," which he calls a politics of the "anti-."<sup>9</sup> As an alternative, Ferguson conceives critiques of neoliberalism through a politics of the "pro-" so that critique serves practical political initiatives that "take advantage of (rather than simply denouncing or resisting) recent transformations in the spatial organization" of governing regimes of power.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in *Critical University Studies*, Jeffrey Williams laments the limitations inherent to "the protocols of criticism." He entreats scholars on institutionality to "switch stances" by offering "practical solutions" that are "more pragmatic."<sup>11</sup> Critiques of proceduralism then might actualize a praxis. If proceduralism's forms of durability derive from institutional structures that locate the academy as the centralizing system of power, I suggest that we employ a critical stance that contests those structures, one that radically integrates different institutional positionalities in order to frustrate the very stability and naturalization of categorical group formation. This form of radical integration is motivated by an intersectionality across scales of institutionality that destabilizes the boundaries of institutional difference, so the capacity for radicalism developed in one institutional context can be made more legible in another.

Critique under this rubric would seek out practical, sustainable interpersonal collaborations with individuals across institutional contexts. Such forms of criticism emerge in cultural studies that emphasize sociological methodologies with social justice imperatives, where interpersonal exchanges take place between community members and academics. These moments of dialogue produce mutual exchanges that lend to forms of critique that decenter the critic—acknowledging the critic's voice as being inflected by individuals at a distance from the academy—and that force critical discourses to be made legible for audiences who are not necessarily housed in the academy. Nancy Abelmann's *The Intimate University*, for instance, integrates the voices and lived experiences of Korean American students through an immersive ethnographic study conducted at Indiana University.<sup>12</sup> Her work highlights how Korean American students are subjugated in the neoliberal university as subjects of liberal humanistic academic processes that value exposure to diverse experiences (read: diversity) as a pathway toward personal and professional growth, while these students also function as the very material objects that constitute diversity, making them simultaneously the subjects and objects of knowledge production for their (white) peers' growth at the expense of their own. The struggles faced by Korean American students in the academy ultimately affect their self-identity

and their experiences in other institutional spheres, such as their religious youth groups and family spheres. Likewise, in *Asian American Media Activism*, a book in media studies that employs sociological approaches, Lori Kido Lopez embeds herself in various community-based activist media outlets and digital media subcultures to constellate voices from disparate institutional backgrounds as they participate in structuring a sense of Asian American cultural citizenship across multiple scales of institutionality that pivot around the academy.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Moustafa Bayoumi's *This Muslim American Life* and *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?* powerfully critique our contemporary state-sponsored post-9/11 War on Terror surveillance culture by documenting its effects on the lives of Muslim Americans and Arab Americans living in Brooklyn.<sup>14</sup> In their own ways, these modes of scholarship disrupt the strict boundaries of the academy since their participants' voices and positions within other adjoining social institutions become more fluid. People in the community are not simply passive objects of critique that get appropriated by the university's legitimating processes; instead, they come to serve as active agents who decentralize the university as the legislating system of power on which proceduralism depends.

My hope is not that we create another group formation in the academy determined by an alternative affiliative essence of radicalism situated around a politics of the "anti-" but rather to motivate a politics of the "pro-" through an approach based on the contexts of institutional overlaps, where scholars can develop and maintain relationships within the university while also participating in community discourses in ways that more actively impact the multiple lives of institutionality.

## Notes

1. Jodi Melamed, "Proceduralism, Predisposing, Poesis: Forms of Institutionality, In the Making," *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016), <http://csalateral.org/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-institutionality-making-melamed/>. 
2. Ibid. 
3. Ibid. 
4. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Metamorphoses of Taste," in *Sociology in Question* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1994), 111–112. 
5. Melamed, "Proceduralism, Predisposing, Poesis." 
6. Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 214. 
7. See, for instance, Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008); Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996); Jeffrey J. Williams, "The Post-Welfare State University," *American Literary History* 18, no. 1 (2006); Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, "The Imperial University: Race, War, and the Nation-State," in *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, edited by Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, 1–52 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). 
8. "Apple Inc.: Notice of 2016 Annual Meeting of Shareholders and Proxy Statement" (Apple Inc., 2016), 60. 
9. James Ferguson, "The Uses of Neoliberalism," *Antipode* 41, no. 1 (2009): 166. 
10. Ibid., 169. 
11. Jeffrey J. Williams, "The Post-Welfare State University," *American Literary History* 18, no. 1 (2006): 208. 
12. Nancy Abelmann, *The Intimate University: Korean American Students and the Problems of Segregation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). 
13. Lori Kido Lopez, *Asian American Media Activism* (New York: NYU Press, 2016). 

14. Moustafa Bayoumi, *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror* (New York: NYU Press, 2015); Moustafa Bayoumi, *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America* (New York: Penguin, 2008). [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



#### Leland Tabares

Leland Tabares is a PhD candidate and the Bunton-Waller Fellow in English at the Pennsylvania State University. His research focuses on neoliberalism, institutionality, and professional labor economies in contemporary Asian American culture and literature. His dissertation project, tentatively titled *Asian America in the Age of Professionalization*, employs professionalization as a critical analytic to interrogate the neoliberal processes that construct, manage, and regulate Asian American working professionals in the contemporary university, Silicon Valley, the restaurant industry, and YouTube. Leland is currently serving a two-year term as the student representative on the executive board for the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS).



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